

NBC

LAWMAKERS THROW PENALTY FLAG AT BCS

by Carrie Dann
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Barack Obama agrees with millions of Americans that they're being cheated out of an opportunity, and a bipartisan group of members of Congress wants to help him fix it.

Sound like health care reform? Anti-discrimination legislation? An inner-city education overhaul?

Or... football.

When President-elect Obama proposed last month that the BCS college ranking system should be replaced with a less byzantine playoff route to the championship bowl game, a lot of football fans in ruby-red states like Texas and Idaho started seeing change they could believe in.

Lovers of the University of Texas Longhorns were outraged to learn over the weekend that their team, despite an identical 11-1 record with top-rated Oklahoma -- and a win OVER the Sooners to boot -- was ranked below them in the BCS list, giving Oklahoma a ticket to the Big 12 Championship and a likely shot at the national title game. And undefeated Boise State could lose a bowl game slot to any one of a handful of teams with lower standing in polls from the AP, ESPN, and even the BCS itself.

So as the burnt-orange crowd in Austin cheers Obama's position on the matter, a few players in Washington are noticing too. Obama's pigskin prescription was music to the ears of **Rep. Neil Abercrombie** (D-OH) who introduced legislation earlier this year to call for a DOJ investigation of the BCS system. His argument -- and that of cosponsors **Lynn Westmoreland** (R-GA), **Jim Matheson** (D-UT) and **Mike Simpson** (R-ID) -- is that the current bowl system, besides being unfairly based on computer models, actually violates the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 by depriving schools in leagues not eligible for an automatic BCS slot of the financial benefits of a bowl game. The fate that could befall the unfortunate Boise State Broncos, for example, Abercrombie calls a clear case of such "restraint of trade."

Upon hearing of Obama's like-mindedness about the benefits of a straight playoff system, Abercrombie penned a letter to the President-elect to point him to the measure, H.Res. 1120, which has languished after being referred to the Judiciary Committee in April.

Perhaps, the letter suggests, the Commander-in-Chief's attention to the matter could help move the chains.

“With the prestige of the Presidency and vigorous pursuit by the Department of Justice in support of fairness and equity,” it reads, “we are certain the BCS will be persuaded to resolve the issues involved to the benefit of the nation’s colleges and their fans.”

Obama certainly doesn’t have a tin ear when it comes to playing politics through collegiate sports (see Primaries, North Carolina and Indiana). And it wouldn’t be the first time that an elected body has taken on the BCS system; the Georgia House of Representatives passed a resolution in February to urge the NCAA to adopt a playoff system.

But with a wobbly American manufacturing system, two wars abroad, emergent new terrorist threats, and a now-official economic recession on the line, it remains to be seen if the play-action politicians will just have to punt for now.